

Inmates’ empathy: Relationship with childhood victimization

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Introduction

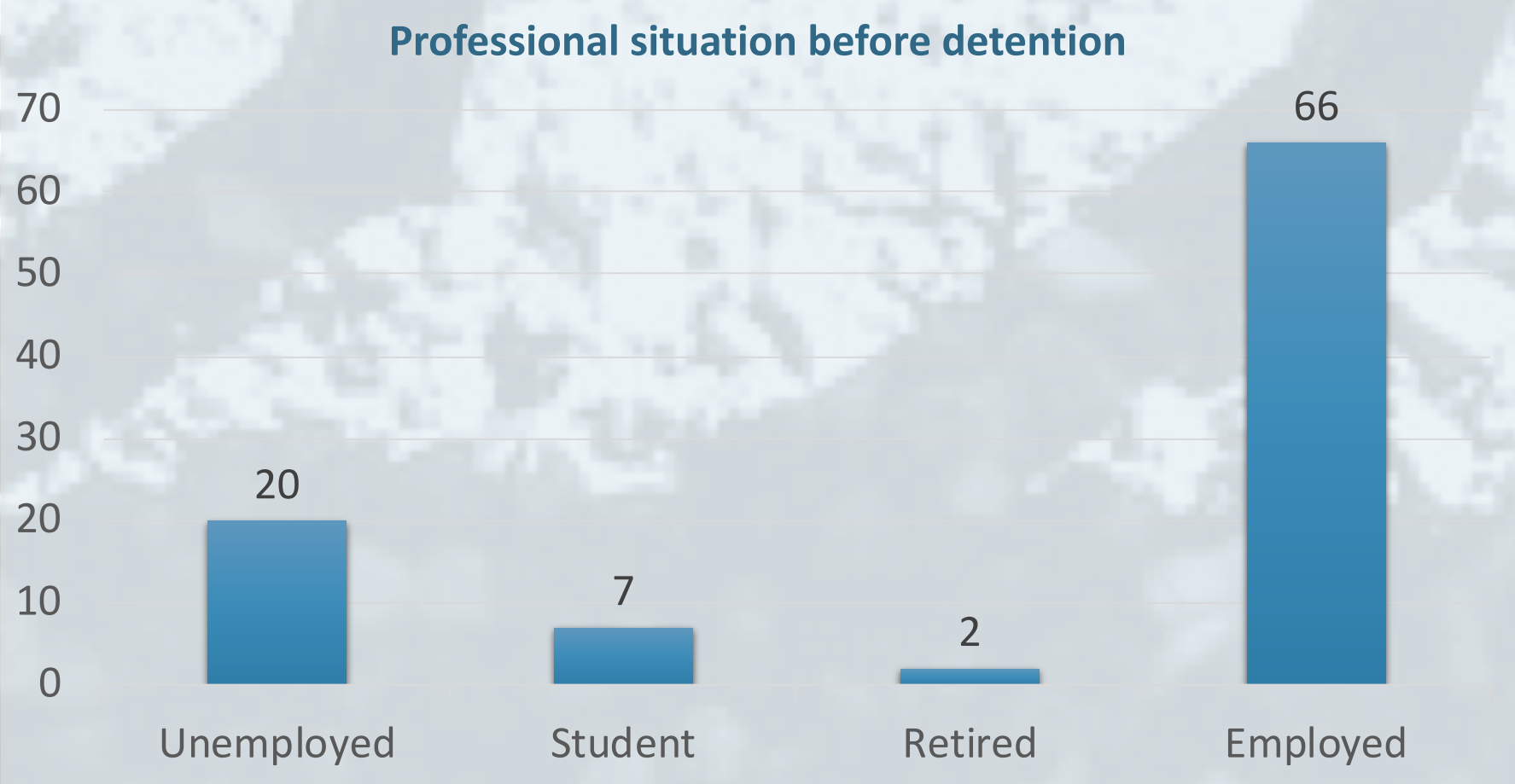
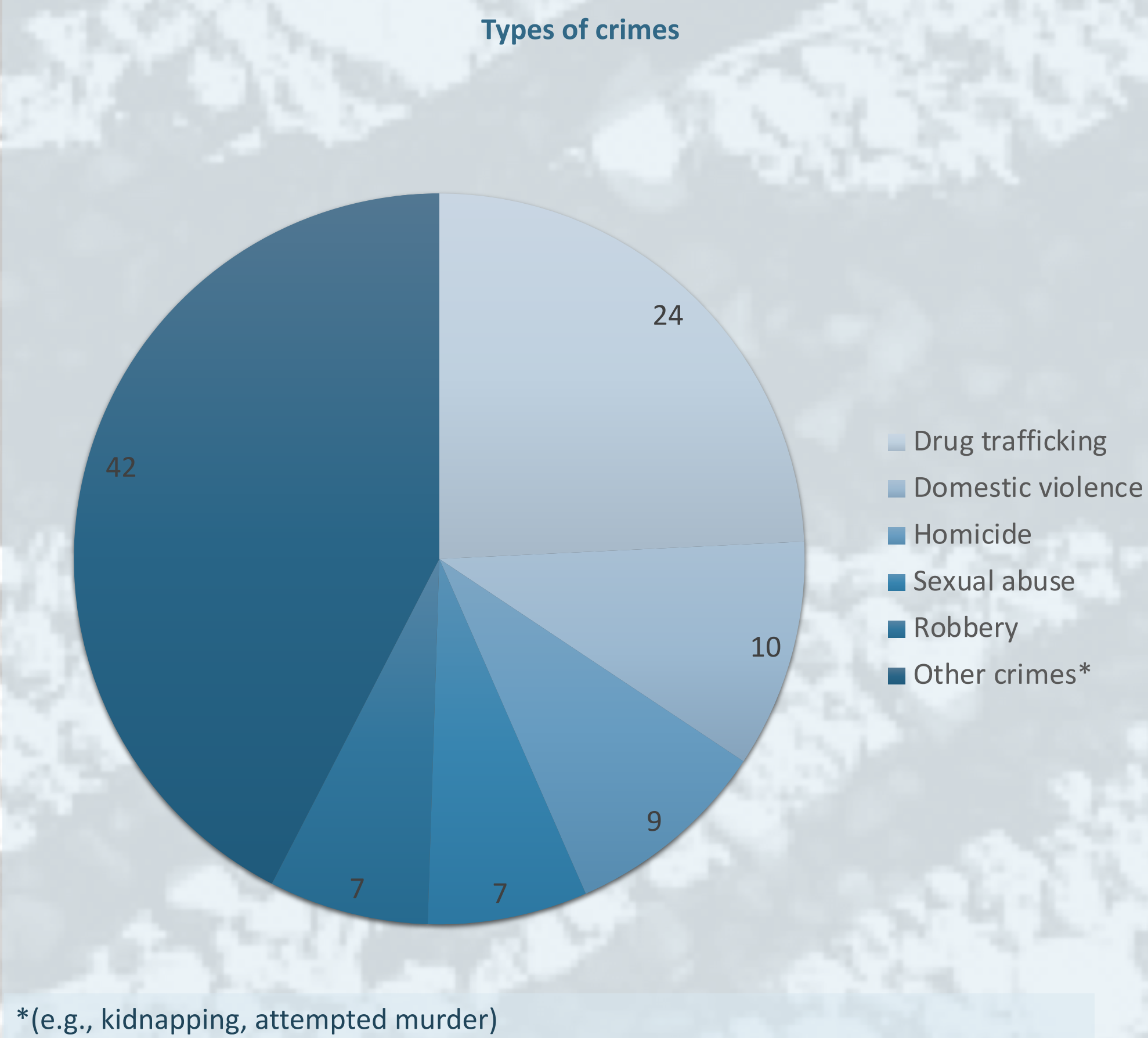
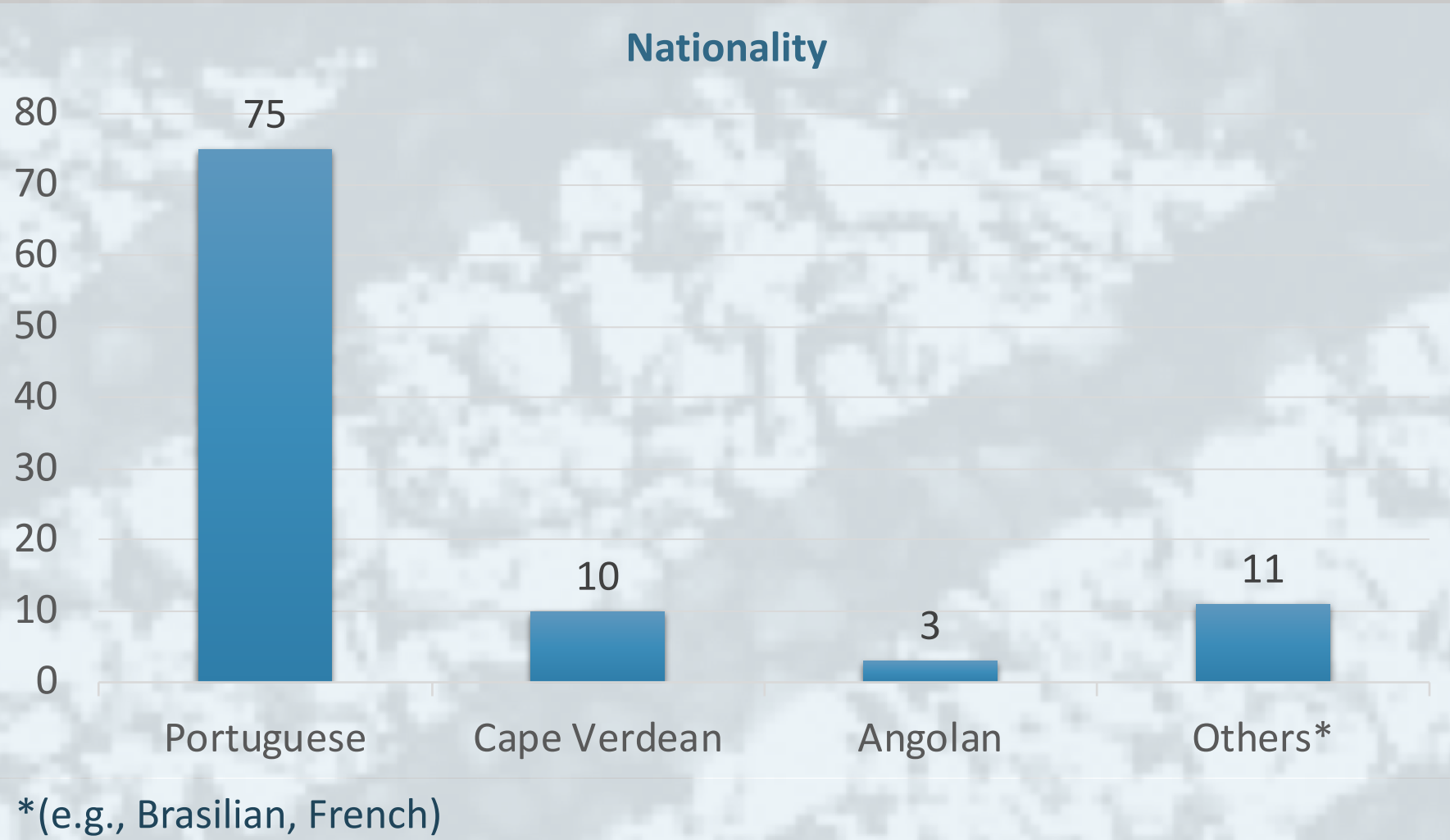
Psychological trauma can occur at any time in life [1], and when it happens during childhood or adolescence, it may have negative repercussions on mental health that prevail in adult life [2]. Empathy is composed of affective and cognitive components that can be developed throughout life [3], and child victims can show problems empathizing with others [4]. The main objective of this study was to evaluate the relationship between childhood victimization trauma experiences and empathy among incarcerated males.

Materials and Methods

Sample

N= 99 inmates males

Age: between 18 and 73 years old [M = 37.96, SD = 11.6]



Participants answered face-to-face to a sociodemographic questionnaire, to the Childhood Trauma Questionnaire – CTQ [5] and the Interpersonal Reactivity Index – IRI [6].

Results

- All the participants experienced all types of victimization in their childhood: emotional abuse, physical abuse, emotional neglect, physical neglect, and sexual abuse.
- The experience of emotional neglect ($M=9.56$; $SD=5.19$) showed the highest incidence of child victimization, and the other types of victimization showed moderate rates.
- The analysis of the IRI confirmed high values of perspective taking ($M=16.70$, $SD=4.00$), empathic concern ($M=17.83$, $SD=3.69$), personal distress ($M=9.84$, $SD=4.88$), and fantasy ($M=13.09$, $SD=4.39$) among the participants.
- We found a positive and significant correlation between childhood trauma and interpersonal reactivity, specifically concerning the physical abuse ($r=.22$, $p=.03$) and the physical neglect ($r=.24$, $p=.02$) on childhood with the presence of personal distress on adulthood.
- All the subscales of child victimization have a significant and positive correlation with the total score of CTQ.

Table 1 Correlation between childhood victimization and empathy (n=99)											
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
1. CTQ total score	1	,89**	,83*	,47**	,86**	,80**	,10	-,02	,02	,18	,04
2. CTQ Emotional Abuse		1	,71**	,31**	,74**	,65**	,13	-,03	,13	,11	,10
3. CTQ Emotional Neglect			1	,32**	,64**	,62**	,00	-,07	-,04	,10	,00
4. CTQ Sexual Abuse				1	,27**	,33**	,34	-,01	-,17	,10	,13
5. CTQ Physical Abuse					1	,62**	,14	,02	,66	,21*	,00
6. CTQ Physical Neglect						1	,73	-,06	,01	,23*	-,05
7. IRI Total							1	,55**	,69**	-,44**	,66
8. IRI Perspective Taking								1	,50**	-,16	,10
9. IRI Empathic Concern									1	-,07	,35**
10. IRI Personal Distress										1	,10
11. IRI Fantasy											1

Note. * p < .05; ** p < .01

Discussion and Conclusions

This study pointed out the emotional neglect as the most frequent victimization in childhood, and this result is similar to previous studies [5,7]. Contrarily to some researches [8], our sample showed high general rates of empathy on inmates. It was also possible to verify that physical abuse and physical neglect during childhood, can influence the experience of distress in those incarcerated adults. Therefore, we conclude that the traumatic events of victimization bring negative repercussions to adult life [2].

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